

Story of the Locked Casket

Solution of a mystery in which love, faith, sin and retribution play a part, and in which love is triumphant at the end.

By Goldie Perry.

In the heart of a great city, for many years, there lived a brother and a sister of whom the outside world knew little. The manner of the man was morose and repellent, and she by constant association had become almost as much of a recluse as he. They made no friends, and desired none, and as the years went by, went out so little that the tumbled-down frame dwelling, which they occupied, was thought to be deserted, and many were the tales of the lights and wailed mutterings which were current in the neighborhood.

For the last twenty years of his life the old man was blind, and was much pitted by an only brother with whom he had quarreled in their youth. Eagerly did this brother seek for some sign of forgiveness, but the old blind man gave none, and fearing to be repelled in his advances, he went no more to the house, but thinking that the quiet couple might be almost destitute, sent, in the fullness of his heart, a sum sufficient for ordinary needs, and found this misplaced contribution next morning among his own mail, with no word thereon.

Happening to pass the old place one day the memory of their childhood was strong upon him. Surely it was not intended that brothers should live like this. Peering through a knot-hole in the high board fence, he saw the poor old blind man sitting in the sunlight among masses of bloom in the yard. Quickly securing a camera, he took the only picture of him in existence, with the sun upon his snowy hair and shining through his heavy beard, which reached almost to his knees. "He is not a happy old man," his brother thought. "If something that I could do, would take away his dejected look, how gladly would I do that thing this day."

Before his failing sight had warned him to desist, this old man was a rare scholar. He was an expert artist, a skilled penman, a passionate lover of flowers, and of all things beautiful. He was well versed in many languages, and was gifted with marked inventive genius. He had made nothing of these talents. He had wasted his life, but there seemed to be no regret. Except for a few flowers, there was nothing in which he took the slightest interest, sitting sometimes all day long in the sun, or drooping wearily from room to room.

After a time his sister found him struggling with Death in the darkness of night, and came flying through the storm to her brother's house for aid. Returning together they found the old man murmuring fitfully, each peal of thunder causing him to stir slightly, and the shaded light falling softly upon his flushed cheek and snowy hair. Starting up, with wide, blind eyes he asked, "Does she not call louder tonight? Her voice seems nearer now. Did she not call my name?" Soothed by gentle touches and kind assurances he slept again, murmuring soft, endearing words to some creature of his dreams. Then, lightly, smiling softly, he whispered: "You must let me carry the flowers. There are thorns among the roses. You have broken your daisy-chain, my little love."

And, reaching forth his hands, he cried, "I shall see you soon, my darling, with your bonny, bonny eyes,"—and then amid the thunder and lightning and a downpour of rain, he started forth upon the only journey he had ever taken, holding to the hands of those whose faces he had not seen for many and many a weary year.

Within the faded parlor, the old woman sat, dry-eyed beside his bier. "I have asked upon my knees in the darkness of night," she moaned, "that the sorrow should be taken from your life. For fifty years the prayer has been unanswered, and now, this thing has come to pass. If I should place within those folded hands, the sunny tress, the mounted flowers, the pictured face, no pang into your quiet heart would come. It is as I longed that it should be, but

the pain in my heart is not the less, because of it." Thus for two days, she whispered to him, and upon the third, they buried him gently, tenderly.

From this time she lived alone, tending carefully the flowers which he had so loved, and the burden of her age being heavy upon her, she grew weaker day by day. The kind brother strove to brighten her gloom with every little attention. And then there came a time when she was unable to rise from her bed, and then, bidding the man listen carefully, as her voice was very weak, she told to him the story of their blind brother's life as she knew it.

"He was a bonny boy," she said, "as fair, you know, as you and I were dark. You remember his cheery voice, his sunny hair, his stalwart form, and the bright blue eyes, which I saw becoming dimmer day by day. It was when you were so far away, that this thing, of which I speak, came upon him. I have often sought to learn all of his secret, but he kept it locked safe in his breast for fifty years.

"I do not know where he met her, but I know that the sun shone all day long in his heart. He knew no care in the days when first he loved her, and from tokens she sent, a mounted flower, a sunny tress, a tinted miniature, I guessed that she cared for him, too. As flowers unfold in the spring-time, even so the natures of these two bright beings blossomed in the light of their love. From his bright and rapturous jargon, I learned that they were to have a cottage home, where the birds sing in the tree-tops, where the sweet flowers bloom, and where pure and sparkling water flows merrily all day long.

"Ah that was a happy, happy time, for I too had a lover, with a dark and noble beauty, and a heart as true as steel. But his country claimed him first, and Heaven next, and I tried to heal the wound in my heart by remembering that he died a hero, and that he took me with him, as I was, and left this faded woman, this hopeless thing.

"My brother's sweetheart was to go upon a long journey. It was necessary that she should travel to Beni-Mora, that oasis in the great Desert of Sahara. My brother was almost at the end of his college course. He must finish this in order to fill the position which he had so longed to occupy, else never would he have permitted her to go alone. She spoke lightly of the journey. There was no room for idle fear in her heart.

"She would write to him often she said, and she would bring her soldier-father with her when she returned, and so she went, and my brother saw her go, and laughed and jested with her to the last, but I noticed a tremor in his voice, a glistening tear in his eye, and I knew that this thing was hard for his gentle heart to bear.

"After a time his joyous nature was reassured, and he sang, and whistled, and studied, and waited for her day by day. The time of her absence lengthened into weeks and months. Her father was better she wrote, but still too weak to travel. She would stay until he became stronger.

"With many assurances of love, she bade him wait patiently, and to see that the flower-garden at the little future home was tended carefully. The house was almost completed now. It needed only a woman's magic touch to change it into a home.—And still she lingered.

"And then there came a day when a definite message reached him. She would leave Beni-Mora upon such a date as, should the sailing be fair, would enable her to reach her home upon the twenty-first of June. The letter had a touch of sadness. She made no mention of her father. But the boy saw in it nothing but joy. "She had chosen his birthday for her glad return; that day of all days; the day which had placed him upon the earth for the sole purpose of making her happy. If anything

should happen, she wrote, she would send some message, and so he had only to wait and wait, as it seemed that he had always waited, and as the day grew near, became almost wild with excitement.

"And," said the sick woman, "I forgot my trouble in the light of his happiness and found pleasure in the thought that this weary world of ours should contain so much of joy.

"He slept little upon the night of the twentieth. He sat by his window and watched the stars fade. He welcomed in the light of this new day, this golden day, which would surely hold for him the bliss of a life-time. He had studied carefully the routes and time-tables. This was the day. This sunny, glorious day was the twenty-first. He pictured her in the glow of the early morning. He saw the glad light in the eyes, the bloom upon the cheek.

"He waited all day long, and toward night doubts rose in his heart. Not this day, now, but tomorrow, oh, tomorrow surely she would come.

"And then there came a messenger in the dewy eve. Wishing not to intrude upon his joy, or his disappointment, I saw only that there was a parcel. He would call me presently, I thought—and so an hour passed. I heard a tottering step upon the floor, and hastened forward to meet him. The joy had passed out of his eyes, as the light of the sun fades into the darkness of night. He seemed as an old man.

"Oh, what has she done to you, my darling? I cried, clinging to him in an agony of fear. "She will not come today," he said softly, stroking my hair with a new and tenderer touch. "Oh, my dear, my dear, she will never come." The old story, I thought. The old, old story—she is false. She has broken his heart, that noble, trusting heart.

"What did the messenger bring? I pleaded. "What did he bring, my darling? His blue eyes gazed at me in childish wonder, and slowly he shook his head. "She will not come today," he said. "My beautiful darling will never come." From that hour, for fifty years, I gave him what was left of my life. I tried with my strength to break the gloom of his soul. We never spoke of her, and when a few weeks after I learned that the cottage-home had been laid in ashes, I said of it, to him, no word.

"With the instinct of wounded animals to hide themselves we lived alone, and slowly in the many lonely years, the light in the blue eyes clouded, and my darling became totally blind. I think he did not care. The world held no beauty for him and when God called him, I was glad that there was peace for him at last.

"I must be getting very old," the poor, old woman added. "The remembrance of his pathetic face is slowly fading from my mind; I so regret that I have never had a likeness of him."

And then the brother bethought him of the picture which he had taken in the sun-shine. The joy in the woman's eyes was pitiful. "You had in your mind, when you took this," she said, "that the day would come, when it would be to me the greatest of earthly treasures. I have mistreated you, all of my life, and I will make restitution.

"We were not destitute, as you thought, my poor blind brother and I. Our investments in our youth, returned to us a thousand-fold. This treasure is yours, but I cannot talk more tonight. I am very weary. In the morning—" she said, and sank into a peaceful slumber, with the photograph held tightly to her breast.

But in the morning she did not waken, and they two are together now, alone in death as in life. The brother pondered long upon her story. The parcel must have contained only love-letters and tokens of affection which the false one had returned. The blind man must have burned them, and so it was all over, over as everything must one day surely be. He was now sole possessor of the dilapidated home, and passed through its ghostly corridors, letting in the sunlight upon the faded scene.

The worm-eaten furniture was worth little. It was of the most antiquated style, and had at one time been valuable. These things were moved down stairs, to be sold or given away, and the old building was to be razed to the earth to make way for a modern business house.

While rummaging in the attic, he found an ancient escritoire behind a pile of worn-out carpet and tapestry. It was of rare make, of old mahogany, with cut-glass knobs of curious design. He drew it forth, pleased that there was one article worth keeping. The different compartments were empty—empty as the lives of the owners. Stooping to test its weight, he noticed a sound which could not have been made by the wooden parts which he had already examined. Thinking that this noise must have been made by the odd castors or the keys in his pocket, he again attempted to carry it over the ragged rug upon the floor.

The heavy weight falling upon a decayed plank in the floor caused it to break, throwing the man violently forward. The escritoire struck the casing of the door with great force, and a large thin piece flew from the bottom.

The man was upon his feet in an instant examining with feverish haste, the secret compartment, from which part of the false bottom had fallen. Reaching in his hand, he drew forth a casket of silver, coffin-shaped, peculiarly chased, and securely locked. In his excitement he had much difficulty in finding his knife, and after selecting the tiniest blade, managed after some time, to spring the lock. The box contained no treasure. Only a faded parchment, with many strange characters in a very small, and almost illegible handwriting. The thing must have been untouched for many years.

He moved toward the cobwebbed window, as the light of day was fast failing. Of the parchment he could make nothing. Not one word could he read. But the case immediately held his attention. So delicately chased was it that it must have been wrought by a master-workman. The small, round knobs upon which it rested were tiny faces, horrible in their representation of awful suffering, faces of a woman, perfect in every lineament, but hideous in their ghastly expression. Every phase of agony was represented in the features of this face, which must at one time, have been beautiful. These four carved visages showed the gaunt eyes of starvation, the hollow cheek of disease, the swollen and protruding tongue of thirst, the wild eyes of fright, the gleam of madness, the presence of death.

On one side of the case in bold relief was a train of camels. Readily the man saw that this represented a scene in the desert. Each tiny animal perfect, each Arab driver perfect in detail—each almost would be thirsty—only seeing.

Upon another side the forms of a man and a woman, the eyes of the man dark and beautiful, an Arab in dress; the woman delicately formed, and very fair. In the face of the dark man there gleamed the light of triumph. In hers was pictured a growing wonder.

Upon another side appeared the figure of the man alone. He was half lying upon the sand. The carving showed a wound in the breast, from which the clotted blood seemed to ooze. The eyes were the eyes of a maniac, fierce, glittering. Beside this striking one upon the sand, was a strangely shaped box, and in his hand a cup. This cup contained quaint carving, a tiny boy playing an instrument of reeds beside a well, deep and seeming dark. The leaves of the tiny tree represented, were perfect in their delicate veining, a tiny bird with flowing tail, sweeping the branch below, a bit of moss upon a stone, near by.

Another side—the figure of a woman prone in the sand, stark, staring, rigid. By her side this strange cup, and the sunlight upon her hair—it must be so.

Where in the world could the simple-hearted old blind man have come upon this rare thing? What did it mean?

Upon the top, an altar, burning, with two strangely garbed figures bent to the earth in attitudes of woe.

What had this thing originally contained? Jewels of the Orient, probably, rare treasures of a foreign land. Could it be a receptacle for holding the ashes of the sacred dead?

Standing near the darkening window, the man fell into a deep reverie. Wierd speculations had overspread his pleasant face with gloom. Recalled by the distant tolling of a church-bell, he wrapped this uncan-

ny thing with a bit of old tapestry, and made his way out into the dew-scented dusk, still musing, wondering, conjecturing. If the woman had known of this box he believed that she would have spoken of it in that hour when they had been together for the last time. Mayhap she meant to speak of it, in that morning which never came to her. It must have belonged to the old man alone.

The escritoire was carefully placed within the brother's home, the broken part repaired, and here the silver box was again placed until such a time as he should find a solution to the mystery. Among the effects of his sister, he had found the will. She left all to him. And in a tiny casket at the head of her bed, he found old government bonds to the amount of many thousands of dollars. Among the few articles of clothing, he found a black satin apron, quilted in circles, and heavy as a coat of mail. Examining these circles, he found that gold pieces had been placed as closely as possible between the two layers of satin, and each had been quilted round carefully.

Then the man went about doing good with the fortune so unexpectedly obtained. He made many a poor man happy, choosing always the most destitute. If a curse should linger round the strange box, he would by good deeds try to break its spell. And in his wanderings about the city he sought out all foreign men. Street-fakirs and fortune-tellers received his patronage, and one day the words of a strange Hindoo caused him to journey toward the desert, with the coffin carefully concealed.

He wandered long, and found none who could read the mystic symbols. And finally, when he had almost despaired, there came to him an aged Arab, who for much gold, solved the problem at last.

"The characters are old, and very badly written," said the old man. "They must have been traced by one dying. The words are in an ancient language, too, but I will try to read it correctly."

Sitting upon the sand near the edge of the desert, the old man pronounced the words in faltering accents:

"To Him Whom She Loved:
"I, Achmet, son of Mohammed being of sound mind at last, as I hope for Mercy from Allah, do solemnly swear that the following story is true:

"I think I have always been mad, yet the things done in this madness are clear to me now, that I know I am sane. I was a wild child—amic crazed. I could bring harmony where others found discord and the reeds were my favorite instruments.

"It was the music which paved the way. It attracted her as the flame attracts the moth, and I played as never before that the spell should not be broken. She was a woman from another land, fair as I never thought to see a human form, with hair bright as the sun on the desert, and eyes which drew my soul from me. She feared me, too. I know, as a child fears danger, but the physical attraction which I had from infancy and the music made it possible for me to see her very often.

"She spoke of going away, and my heart sank within me. I would not see her go. And then, suddenly, her father died, and she was alone in this desert land with no one but me as a friend. How she clung to me in those days is the sweet memory of my life, and there arose within me a desire to possess this lovely woman as my own; to be loved as this golden-haired man was loved in the land which had sent her forth.

"We buried the father and she, in her grief, gave no thought to me but longed for her land and for you. I told her that by going through the desert she would save much time on her journey, and so with infinite trust she went forth with me with guides and camels, and all things necessary.

"Wearied with the unaccustomed heat, the journey, and the drowsy chant of the guides, she fell asleep at our first resting place, and when she awoke, she and I were alone in the desert. I must have been mad. I hope I that was mad, else Allah can have no mercy upon me. I cannot forget the bewilderment in her eyes, the dawning horror, the mortal fear. As I hope to be fer-

given, I did not mean to kill her then. I only wanted the love which she could give, and which I knew by her look that I could not have. And then in a frenzy ungovernable, I clasped her close, seeking her lips with mine, and hearing not her cries for mercy.

"And in that instant I received within my breast this dagger thrust, this wound which makes my pain unbearable at times. She had not fully trusted me; she had secured this thing from her father's possessions, and now she had made a helpless creature of me, who had once been so strong. My weakened arms fell from her, and I cursed her from my heart. 'You are mad,' she said. 'You must be mad.'

"And then a thought came to me, which a demon must have prompted. She should not escape me thus. If I must die she should not live. I had with me a coffin-shaped case in which I had carried poisons from various plants which I had been studying. The case was of this shape for the reason that the skull and cross-bones are used in your land; to warn one of the danger; to bid one touch not, taste not, handle not.

"And while she stood at a little distance straining her eyes to catch a glimpse of some traveler or caravan, I crept nearer the water and placed the poison within the hollow handle of the strange chased cup from which she must drink. I had not long to wait for this thing which I knew must come to pass. And when she had drunk, when the beautiful eyes dilated and the white hands sought the snowy brow; then did my reason come to me. 'Oh, my darling I did not mean to do it; I was mad,' I cried. 'I was mad.' But she heard no word of mine, and I lay and saw her die.

"And as I remember the expressions upon her lovely face, I have carved them upon this casket. I have put into them my soul, my regrets, my mortal agony. I send them to you because I know she meant to reach you on the twenty-first or send some reason why she could not.

"When you receive this, there will be no one upon this earth upon whom you can wreak your vengeance.

"My friends have promised to send this message safe. They have buried my darling and you are deep in the desert, and no man will ever know her resting place. I have ordered that my ashes be strewn above her grave. And this is all."

So ended the manuscript and the Arab slowly raised his head. "I remember as though it were but yesterday," he said, "for it was I who sent to thee the message of Achmet. Didst thou come to take vengeance upon me?"

"No, no," said the brother, kindly. "It is over now, all over. Those who have suffered through this crime are now safe at rest, ere this. It was my brother's sorrow, and no harm can touch him now. Tell me the story, as you know it, friend."

"From my childhood," the old man said, softly, "I loved my little master as my life. There was naught of cruelty in his nature. The thing which he did was foreign to him, as the blood-thirst is foreign to a tiny lamb. Gentle always, and quiet, too, he sat beside some rippling stream and made such music from the reeds, as must have been inspired.

"Precocious from his earliest years, he was, and yet his ways were not as the ways of other Arab boys. He found no pleasure in their idle sports. I see now, that he must have been very, very different. Skillful in every thing, he made no failure of his undertakings, but gentle he was and kind, loving and generous always.

"Ah, surely, I who was with him in his different moods, I who saw the soul in his brown eyes, surely do I know that he was tender in this love of his, tender as a mother with her babe. If the woman had been of this passionate land or if she had known him always, as had I, she must have loved him, even as I loved him and as I love him still.

"He sought always the quiet places, and he studied the flowers and the birds, for very love of them. One day I sat in the branches of a tree upon the bank of the stream, thinking idly, and watching the leaves and twigs go swirling by. I saw my master creep forward, intently gazing at a little bird, which was singing sweetly and swaying on his branch in the breeze.

"He came forward softly, gracefully, his tall, brown body half-bent, his eyes steadfastly gazing, and before my mind had grasped what he had meant to do, he had in his hand the fluttering bird, and my heart was as lead within me. How had my idol fallen! The gentle one to do this thing. To take for no reason, the helpless little life.

"But even as I gazed, he whispered softly, 'Dost thou fear me, little

thing. Dost thou regret that I should see how tiny tiny wings are fashioned, and that I should wish to know the dainty colour of thy breast? Thou needest not fear me, little one.'

"And then the supple fingers opened, and the bright creature flew away, and with it went my doubts of him, forever, ever more. If, as the days went by, Sorrow should come to the gentle heart, if he should so much as whisper my name in quiet longing, upon my knees through the desert would I creep to him, counting the weary miles but paces.

"He was a student, too, this noble youth, and being with him in the solitude, I learned much from his companionship.

"There was a language," the old man said, touching the parchment gently, "which he thought most beautiful of all, which he studied carefully, and in which I think his thoughts were formed so curious did they seem to me at times. And as he studied I learned this strange tongue also, and I am glad that it was so."

"And the other gift with which Heaven had blessed him, was the art of carving. Ah, I have marvelled at his skill. His subjects always a little odd, a little different from any other subject, but always perfect in their delicate tracing. I can see the slim brown fingers, nor, the rapt dark eyes, the firm set lips and noble brow.

"(I watched him carve the silver cup, of which this parchment speaks. The black-eyed boy; himself in his youth, with the well, and the bird, and the tree which he loved.)

"And then the woman came.

"From that day I saw how it was with him, and I trembled for his happiness. 'But no,' again I thought, 'there is naught to fear. She cannot help but love him.' She must have done so, too, I think, had there not been another from the first. As I watched his happiness in her presence, his depression when alone, I knew she held for him all of joy or of sorrow. And when she was to go away, back to that far off land, I thought he would forget, perhaps, and so I was glad in my heart. He wished to go a part of the long way with her, and I knew he wanted her alone, and so I did not go with him. Allah forgive me, that I did not.

"After a little time my restless heart began to long for him. I was jealous of the sun-crowned one. I would go to meet him. I grew apprehensive and took a friend with me. How we found him you already know. I saw no reason why he should not live except the deep grief which held him enthralled. I besought him to let us take him back to Beni-Mora, but he would not. And ever, between sharp spasms of agony, he carved feverishly upon the silver box. It seemed that the desire to finish it, kept up his failing strength.

"The girl was so pitiful in her youthful beauty, so slight, so very, very fair. But I hardened by heart against her, for had she not taken his life, as he had taken hers?

"It was all over at last. I have never been the same. I raised the silver cup from the sand, and carried it home with me, and all the world seemed dark as midnight, under that glowing desert sun. There is no more to tell, my friend. It is ended, as the joy of life was ended on that day so long ago. Oh, Achmet, Achmet!"

Then the man drew forth the purse, well filled.

"I could not touch it," the old Arab cried. "I cannot take thy gold. There is naught to pay for the reading of this message from the dead. I knew not from whose pen it came, when I set the price so high. Oh, if the heartache of one, could atone for the sins of another, how clear and white would be the page 'neath Achmet's name."

Back to his home, from the desert-waste, came the man in the glow of one summer day. Pausing to gaze at the massive walls of an old cathedral, a resolve came to him in this quiet hour. Entering the old place, reverently, he paused slowly down the ever dimming aisle, and gazed with loving face upon the snowy statue of the Holy Mother with her Babe.

They whose sad story he had learned, were very, very human. But was it not these and such as these that Sacred One had died to save? Would it be sacrilege to place the silver box, with its carved, pathetic story, within the crevice in the niche where the Holy statue stood? This sacred place would never by un-loving hands be desecrated, and the story of these heart-aches need never more be known.

He hid it thus, from sight, in the gathering darkness, and falling upon his knees before the altar, buried his face in his hands, in silent prayer.